

# How the Kremlin and the Media Ended Up in Bed Together

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*Editor's note: This is the longest text ever published by The Moscow Times. We've decided to publish it because it describes in detail a key Russian narrative, of how the Kremlin rules the country with the help of the controlled media. It is a bitter story of how the Russian media, with very few exceptions, have abandoned, sometimes through coercion, but mostly voluntarily and even eagerly, their mission of informing the public and have turned into creators of the Matrix-like artificial reality where imaginary heroes and villains battle tooth and nail in Russia's Armageddon.*

After enjoying a brief interval of freedom, it seems that Russian media are now returning to the conditions of the late 1980s, when editors stood outside the door of the censorship office waiting for approval to go to press.

However, the "new censorship" that has emerged in Russia is not merely a tool for controlling

the media from the outside. The new censorship is like a cancerous tumor that attacks the not-so-healthy body of the media from the inside and supplants everything of value or vitality with diseased tissue.

Like communist propaganda, the principles of this new censorship draw on the Orwellian concept of "doublethink," form the basis of state policy and, by definition, completely reject the idea of democracy.

The president and senior officials now use the media as a tool for forming public opinion, forcing citizens to accept a false agenda in place of the real one.

The degradation of Russian media is evidenced by the fact that they implicitly agree to compromise themselves in this way. Many corporate or private media entities simply agree to these terms as a matter of survival, but a surprising number not only agree to the state's manipulations, but go one step further by offering creative ideas for advancing the Kremlin's official line.

The new censorship significantly expands on the classic, encyclopedic definition of the term by permeating not only news and information services, but since the mid-2000s, actively interfering in the arts and academia as well.

Another important feature of Russian censorship is that it is not all-embracing, but permits alternative points of view and even criticisms of itself. However, any journalist or media outlet taking advantage of that opportunity is walking on a minefield.

## **The Censorship Toolkit**

The most important tool of the new censorship is the state budget as a resource for determining which media thrive or survive.

Access to federal budgetary funds remains a key tool for creating a system whereby the authorities can manage media content and media outlets themselves. Those publications and individual journalists for whom survival or personal enrichment is of primary importance are vulnerable to manipulation by the granting or denial of state subsidies, benefits, increases or decreases in financing for state-controlled media and access to capital provided by oligarchs with close ties to the Kremlin and Putin.

Managing the agenda. These practices include both "political briefings" in which chief editors of various media are called in to the presidential administration, and telephone "hotlines" that directly connect the chief editors of key media outlets with the Kremlin. The presidential administration can make use of such methods as directly substituting material produced by its own staff for journalistic reports and manipulating the underlying fears of the masses or otherwise manipulating the emotions of media consumers.

The effective (for the media or their owners) building of a pseudo-reality. Whoever fashions the news agenda also receives the profit, financial or political.

The introduction of "plants" or "observers" from media outlet owners and directly from the presidential administration and other key government structures such as the FSB,

the Investigative Committee and even the Federal Drug Control Service. A degradation of editorial integrity is the inevitable byproduct of this practice.

The effective use of networks of staff informers. At the heart of the new censorship is a network of paid and voluntary informants. This "new" network — that arose on the basis of the new, post-party loyalty of key editors and journalists — is maintained with access to illicit money connected with journalism for bribes. Without exception, all of these "cooperative" (from the viewpoint of the Kremlin) editors and journalists involved in the scandalous practice of publishing outside material as their own editorial comments have, at the very least, aroused the suspicions of their colleagues.

Turning all news into a show. Those who understood the creation and reporting of news as "one more ratings-based entertainment product" played a role in creating and disseminating the government's "false agenda," and those who contributed most to its "artificial" content received rewards and encouragement.

In this way, leaders ensure that the Russian audience sees and hears — down to the smallest detail — only the picture of the world that the Kremlin wants it to see and hear.

The real issues have not disappeared, but it is forbidden to show that reality to the Russian people.

## **Centrality of Putin**

The essence of the new censorship can be described as follows:

Russia — as Putin and his loyal (for now) lieutenants understand it — does not need an agenda based on real information.

To the contrary, the only necessary tool for managing Russia's imperfect society is an artificially constructed agenda that is "imprinted" on society by television channels that are fully controlled by the state. Not only news and analytical programs serve as tools for applying this pressure, but also broadcasts of the arts and even entertainment.

A key element in this artificial agenda is an exaggerated role for the central character in Russia's information milieu — the president of the Russian Federation.

For example, when Putin was once again experiencing strained relations with Moscow protestors in late May 2013, the main weekly program on Channel One, "Vremya," ran 11 pieces on Putin's various activities and only two covering other recent events. What's more, every mention or depiction of Putin was not only positive, but slavishly complimentary.

The new censorship does not only exclude real events from the agenda, but replaces them with false messages designed to make viewers feel dependent on the main hero of the stories — Vladimir Putin.

That model did not change during the Ukrainian crisis.

Those broadcasts focused on the idea of "fascist Banderovite" Ukrainians and how they were teaming up with those who had "spawned" them in order to attack Russia or its interests.

In any case, the propaganda had to assert that such a war had already almost begun.

This manufactured agenda reached a peak in early summer when Russia's state-controlled television channels began portraying pro-Russian separatist leader Igor Girkin (aka Igor Strelkov) as "the savior of the Donbass Russians" and falsely reported that Ukrainian forces had crucified a young boy in Slavyansk.

These distortions of reality were no mere improvisations by presidential administration staff who were instructed to manage the news on Channel One or the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company (VGTRK). Senior officials undoubtedly issued clear instructions in this regard and much of the text broadcast on the Vesti television channel and "Vremya" news show and their websites has been introduced from above without any input from editors.

The primary characteristic of the new censorship is that it motivates so-called "journalists" to not only serve the Kremlin agenda, but to creatively advance it.

The "crucified boy in Slavyansk" is just the most superficial example of that. A far more insidious and potentially dangerous phenomenon is the frequent and barely perceptible distortions to reports from previously neutral programs and writers.

For example, by simply inserting promo shorts for the forthcoming "Vremya" news show during the vastly popular primetime women's talk show "Pust govoryat" ("Let Them Speak"), viewers without intention to watch the newscast are gradually infected and become carriers of the virus of lies and aggressiveness.

In this way, masses of television viewers become not only victims of deliberate manipulation, but also strong supporters of a policy of hatred directed toward Ukrainians whom they know only through state-controlled television reports.

This is a world that has been constructed especially for their consumption. It contains enemies and the one person who can effectively oppose them: Vladimir Putin. The greater their hatred for the enemy, the deeper is their love for Putin, and vice versa.

With this false agenda filling the airwaves so thoroughly and constantly, the average Russian cannot but respond to surveys with the conviction that Putin is the mainstay of his life.

### **That Bittersweet Word — Freedom**

Soviet media was first freed from censorship in August 1990 when printing houses stopped requiring publishers to present a stamp of approval from the Main Administration for Safeguarding State Secrets in the Press.

That launched a brief period in which the media enjoyed nearly total freedom. Society began a sober examination of its ideological heritage, retrieved important documents previously classified by the authorities and resurrected episodes from Russian history that censors had previously either ignored or eliminated.

The relative ease of the transition from a totalitarian media model to the new Russian model is due to the fact that former Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev's policy of "glasnost" greatly

undermined the status and capabilities of the Communist Party Central Committee with regard to political and ideological censorship.

In addition, Alexander Yakovlev, one of the architects of perestroika, headed the ideological department of the central committee for several years, and it was his support that made possible the appearance of the Moskovskiy Novosti newspaper with its more progressive civil and political reporting.

Party leadership of the media practically ceased in 1991, and it was the disappearance of that control during the final months of the Soviet Union — first in the Baltic states and later in the Caucasus — that made it possible for the republics to rapidly separate and form their own political class.

The journalistic community was caught up in the euphoria of freedom of the press, the freedom to express political views and the freedom to criticize the ruling authorities.

Because the number of "free" media outlets was continually growing, the leaders of the anti-democratic putsch of Aug. 19, 1991 suspended the publication of all newspapers and effectively instituted a wartime censorship regime on television and radio.

However, the ban did not work: A number of printers released the "Obshchaya Gazeta" on Aug. 21, and by the morning of Aug. 23 when the putsch collapsed, both formal and informal structures of party control over the media no longer existed.

When they were first freed from party control, most media had no idea how to view themselves as separate entities with the duty of reporting the truth to the people and earning money at the same time.

The events of August 1991 were probably not only the final chord in the activities of the Communist Party as a political organization, but also the final stage in the existence of the Soviet media in their classical form.

Most editors and journalists had no market understanding of the economics of the media. The situation was easier for television and radio as both received funding from the Finance Ministry.

The economic problems of the transition period affected the entire system of Soviet media: Newspapers and other print publications faced runaway inflation — the money collected in early 1991 from subscriptions ran out long before those subscriptions had ended.

Retail sales were very high, but Soyuzpechat, the state's monopolistic distributor of newspapers and magazines, began suffering from problems caused by inflation and failed to make timely payments for the publications it delivered to its vast network of newsstands.

At that time, no advertising or sales professionals existed.

Many publications declared their "independence" in the belief that they could earn a great deal of money in the emerging market economy.

However, that turned out to be an illusion. The deregulation of prices and the flourishing

barter economy, along with the freeing up of foreign trade from state controls led to an acute shortage of money and newsprint.

Faced with economic hardship, the former Soviet newspapers rushed to ask for help from President Boris Yeltsin and the government that they had been mercilessly criticizing — some for its lack of radical reforms, and others for its infatuation with liberal policies.

As the "stewards of perestroika," *Izvestia*, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, *Trud*, *Argumenty i Fakty* and other publications argued that the state had "an obligation to support freedom of speech," they also demanded that leaders "pay for the support" those publications had given them during the dramatic events of those years.

Many of those editors, along with a number of their journalists, were State Duma deputies, and the Yeltsin administration agreed to extend assistance to them, in some case by providing free premises for their publications.

Those premises were not only a lifesaver during the economic turmoil of the early 1990s, but also a source of rental income in later periods, as well as a reason that some oligarchs considered the publications attractive investment opportunities.

And despite the market-oriented reforms the state was adopting, in 1993 it decided to subsidize postal fees for Russia's press and provide tax breaks for media.

The state also funded television. The federal budget paid, albeit only modestly, to transform the Soviet Union's State Committee for Television and Radio Broadcasting into several separate companies — primarily Ostankino, that later became Channel One, and to establish and develop VGTRK. The management of those new channels also made use of the spacious, Soviet-era buildings housing their operations to rent out retail space and to engage in free, often unregulated business activities.

Another significant event deserves attention here. The election of the Congress of People's Deputies in 1989 — that opened the last stage of the Soviet Union — brought a large number of editors and journalists into the ranks of first the legislative, and later the executive branches of government.

That process was fast but short-lived: As early as 1993, not a single prominent media name remained among Duma deputies, and only the rare controversial figure appeared on party lists — individuals such as Alexander Nevzorov from St. Petersburg television, or later, Alexander Khinshtein from the *Moskovsky Komsomolets* newspaper.

However, that initial "integration" into the halls of power established ongoing backroom ties between a number of media outlets and Yeltsin-era government institutions.

Those connections will play a significant role later in this story, but for now it is enough to point out that the groundwork for the future adverse changes in the Russian media was already laid during the early years of "free Russia."

The state subsidies for media and their "long working relationship" with government agencies that began during the very first years of the modern Russian state subsequently became one of the cornerstones of the new censorship.

## **A Loud Bell Opens the First Act**

The winter of 1995 was a very difficult time for the Russian authorities. The main problem was the extremely low voter approval ratings held by the aging Yeltsin.

The unrestrained political debate in the media was also damaging for Yeltsin and his government: Newspapers and television channels criticized the country's leadership for everything they did or did not do, sometimes for no reason at all.

Newspapers and television stations managed to somehow adapt to life under free market conditions. Advertising appeared, and the barter economy was replaced by first illicit, and later ordinary contracts.

Bankers and the country's few industrialists took an interest in the media. They saw their ability to influence newspapers as an opportunity to help friendly government officials or to intimidate competitors. Despite the fact that by 1991, media outlets that published criticisms were no longer subjected to organized repression and criminal charges as they had been under the Soviet system, the fear of publicly expressing criticism continued.

It is important to understand that once the Russian media broke free from their organizational, economic and political fetters in the 1990s, they set out to become independent players in the public sphere — that is, to occupy the same position as media do in democratic and liberal societies. Russian editors and journalists learned from their Western colleagues.

The Chechen War from 1994–96 began with journalists enjoying almost complete freedom. As someone who covered the storming of Grozny in the winter of 1994–95 and many other events of those years, I saw that the only problems journalists and film crews faced were actually reaching the conflict zone and trying to stay alive once they were there. But by the fall of 1995, the army brass, and especially the Federal Security Service units attached to the military forces, began to actively oppose the independent activities of the journalists in Chechnya and the surrounding area.

Russian television channels were divided between those assigned to "ride on an armor" with military units (primarily RTR, and occasionally Channel One and ORT), and those that preferred to work independently of the military (NTV, TV-6 and others).

Journalists unwittingly played a significant role in one of the first major terrorist attacks in modern Russia: the seizure of a hospital in Budyonnovsk in 1995 by Chechen commander Shamil Basayev.

As Basayev and his militants left the hospital, they replaced hostages with journalists, taking them onto the buses that they used to escape the scene as live shields. It was those journalists who witnessed firsthand how badly the Russian special forces performed and how Basayev and his men managed to escape with minimal losses.

However, that situation changed when it was decided to help Yeltsin win re-election in 1996.

When the most powerful Russian oligarchs supported the idea of a second term for Yeltsin, it

meant that not only would NTV, owned by Vladimir Gusinsky, and ORT, controlled by Boris Berezovsky, come on board, but that a whole group of publications receiving funding in one way or another from these and other oligarchs would have to get involved in the campaign.

Although the goal of keeping power in the hands of Yeltsin's inner circle was originally an organizational and political task, it now shifted into the hands of the media. It was decided to actively use informational pressure, manipulation of the agenda and informational priming to convince the Russian people to re-elect their first president.

Thus, the presidential administration held "media planning meetings" every Friday starting in the summer of 1996.

As former Deputy Chief of the Presidential Administration Sergei Zverev recalls, they were "political meetings where we discussed the agenda of the coming week and developed proposals on how to cover those topics in the media, primarily on television."

Following those meetings, either the chief of the administration or authorized deputies would deliver "assignments from the authorities" to the heads of the main television channels.

It was during those months that government public relations people began playing a direct role in how information was presented to the public. Television channel editors and chiefs were generally willing to play their part. For example, TV-6 founder and VGTRK head Eduard Sagalayev was even a member of Yeltsin's campaign staff.

Longtime Kremlin spin doctor Gleb Pavlovsky claims that his Foundation for Effective Politics first proposed the concept of "media management" back in 1996, and not as a short-term measure to help win the elections, but as a permanent policy model of the presidential administration.

After those elections, spin doctors became regular participants in formulating and implementing the government's "official line."

## **Dollar, the Censor**

A handful of financial and industrial groups controlled most of Russia's mass media in the 1990s and into the early 2000s.

Vladimir Gusinsky's Media-Most, with NTV at its center, also held popular newspapers, magazines, publishing houses and film companies.

Boris Berezovsky controlled not only ORT (Channel One), but also owned a number of primarily "independent" newspapers through a complex ownership structure.

Other major players such as LUKoil, the Unified Energy System of Russia (RAO UES), Vladimir Potanin's Interros and Mikhail Khodorkovsky's Menatap all had their own media holdings as well.

For its part, Gazprom lent money for the Media-Most project.

After the election miracle of 1996, when the concerted use of political and media resources



helped reinstate the unpopular Yeltsin, it became clear to the major financial and political players in Russia that the creation of a pseudo-reality for the public's consumption does yield fruit.

Those who build the media construct reap the profits — whether commercial or political.

It was in the period from 1996 to 2000 that the second element formed that would later transform into the new censorship under the rule of President Vladimir Putin.

One of the features of the current model of media and media communications in Russia is that the manner and extent to which editorial boards are controlled depends on who owns the particular media outlet, their ties to this or that political group and whether the government has levers by which it can directly influence those owners.

Despite the fact that some media were relatively successful commercially, almost no one viewed the media as a business per se. What made certain media assets attractive was their ability to influence politics and the state's regulatory stance toward specific sectors, as well as their usefulness as a tool for defending against competitors or taking action against them.

Media owners preferred to appoint obedient and servile chief editors whom they could easily circumvent whenever they needed to take matters into their own hands.

The oligarchs who owned various media were the first to install "plants" on their staffs, individuals who had the "authority" from the owner to not only control the editorial process, but also to influence overall content.

These "plants" were originally charged with security-related tasks such as ensuring that "articles for hire" did not embarrass the owner and his business partners or, conversely, to explain the best methods for targeted mud-slinging on behalf of the owner. However, later, their job duties became heavily politicized.

Even the Kremlin loyalist publisher Aram Gabrelyanov has had to deal with such "plants." In the following interview from Lenta.ru in May 2012, he describes such an incident at Izvestia.

"A man was standing there when I arrived at the newspaper office. I will not give his name because he happens to be sick now. He approached me holding out a business card and said: 'I was appointed here by the presidential administration. Aram Ashotovich, after you have read the material submitted for publication, you will give it to me.' I said, 'You must be joking — or crazy.' He said, 'Have you looked at the business card?' I said, 'You're fired, dismissed.' He told me, 'Do you even understand who appointed me to this job?' I said, 'I don't give a damn who appointed you.' I really did fire him."

Interestingly, some of the "old" media that changed ownership between the late Yeltsin and early Putin years, had at that time already begun to show signs of readiness for their owners to censor the publications for political and thematic content.

For example, the Argumenty i Fakty newspaper gained its unprecedented, Guinness Book of World Records-breaking circulation of 33.5 million copies in 1990 after emerging from the perestroika process as an ultra-liberal and progressive publication headed by its founder

and chief editor Vladislav Starkov.

After Starkov sold his controlling stake to the PromSvyazKapital group, Argumenty i Fakty began conforming to the views of its new owners, the Ananyev brothers. Alexei and Dmitry Ananyev are Russian Orthodox and openly declare it, but they do not require the same from the editors of the media they own.

However, within only a few months after the change of ownership, editors at the newspaper — who had previously been strictly atheistic and critical of the Church — became pro-Orthodox and began inviting writers whom the owners found "pleasing," including the influential priest Tikhon Shevkunov, often referred to as Vladimir Putin's spiritual father.

### **Cooperative and Not-So-Cooperative**



Denis Grishkin / Vedomosti

### **Alexei Gromov**

First deputy head of the  
Presidential Administration

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Alexei Gromov is a career diplomat who left his post as an ambassador back in the 1990s to work at the Kremlin. He first headed the Kremlin press service and created the "presidential pool." He became Vladimir Putin's press secretary in 1999 and a deputy head of the presidential administration in 2008.

Gromov is a key manager of public policy for mass media. In addition to serving as a member of the board of directors for Channel One, he regularly holds "briefings" with the heads

of state-controlled media and determines the public agenda as well as the political and personal guidelines for acceptable content. Gromov is primarily responsible for television and traditional print media. Since 2012, Chief of Presidential Administration Sergei Ivanov has enlisted another deputy head, Vyacheslav Volodin, to oversee the Internet. Volodin and Gromov regularly lock horns over the scope of their authority.

Gromov functions as a personal liaison between Putin and Russia's largest media outlets. To a great extent, his personal connections and knowledge of the "ins and outs" of the work of journalists and editors ensures their loyalty and the government's control over the industry.

Soviet-era censorship was the outward manifestation of the Communist Party's more basic policy of filtering and controlling its membership and bureaucratic elite.

Political loyalty ensured party control over editorial boards and the "cooperativeness" of their chiefs, who were only very rarely true professionals. In the final years of the Soviet Union, the chief editors of the largest newspapers were, almost without exception, former secretaries of regional or city party committees or else former heads of the party's ideological department. They might have had some form of specialized education, or even no education at all.

For example, in 1983 Pavel Gusev left the position of secretary of the Moscow Krasnaya Presnya District Party Committee to head Moskovsky Komsomolets. And after serving as deputy head of the ideological department of the central committee and overseeing the Main Administration for Safeguarding State Secrets in the Press, Alexander Potapov served as chief editor of the Trud newspaper in the 1990s. These weren't rare examples — it was a common practice.

Meanwhile, Vladimir Putin's arrival in the Kremlin in the summer of 1999 required another mobilization of media resources. Yeltsin's chosen successor and former FSB chief was not

a public politician and began his leadership as a virtual unknown.

At the same time, the worsening situation in the North Caucasus and the apartment bombings in 1999 in Moscow, Volgograd and Buynaksk once again raised the question of how much media coverage was permissible for such tragedies.

In 1999, Alexei Gromov became Putin's press secretary and Mikhail Lesin became Communications and Press Minister.

The combination of these two officials in one form or another would come to dominate the eventual emergence of the new censorship.

In addition to "political planning meetings" every Friday, media bosses now also met regularly with Vladislav Surkov, the deputy head of the presidential administration responsible for domestic policy.

While the meetings with Gromov set the official agenda and determined which television channels would have responsibility for which part of it, the latter briefings with Surkov formulated the specific content of the message.

Over time, the Gromov meetings increasingly took on the format of a "situation room" in which the heads of the federal television channels helped formulate the message of the new Russian leader and the tactics needed for dealing with the resources of the "opposition."

The term "opposition" primarily meant Vladimir Gusinsky and his NTV channel, which had taken an openly critical stance toward Putin's appointment.

After the "taming" of NTV in 2001, the channel's new chiefs were invited to the Friday briefings, and by 2006, the attendees included Russia Today director Margarita Simonyan and the heads of Ren-TV and TV Center.

At the heart of the new censorship lies a specific type of post-party loyalty on the part of editors, key journalists and professional groups. A "cooperative" editor is one who puts the interests of the Kremlin and relations with the authorities above the interests of his audience. The Communist Party achieved exactly the same thing by making the editor dependent on the party "vertical," and not on whether the publication succeeded with audiences.

## **Version Number Six**

The story of how the authorities cracked down on Vladimir Gusinsky's Media-Most is definitely a key event in the development of the new censorship. It demonstrated how the new Russian authorities would ensure — if not enforce — media neutrality toward the government.

Gusinsky's primary dispute with the authorities evolved around certain business interests and, of course, around the right to set the information agenda independently.

The attack against Media-Most undoubtedly also had the goal of excluding topics and events, individuals and opinions from the mass media agenda that ran counter to the interests of the

Kremlin groups.

By distancing ourselves from the events of the last 14 years, we can say with reasonable certainty that the establishment of control over NTV became the main turning point that led toward the emergence of the new censorship.

Whether they planned it or not, those who organized and carried out the attack on NTV's "unique journalistic team" on April 14, 2001 suddenly found themselves with something new: the scary example they could hold up to intimidate other "uncooperative media."

The authorities then blacklisted anyone who chose the path of resistance and criticism, barring them from senior positions as journalists and managers or from working as the "public face" of media outlets owned by the state or with close ties to the Kremlin.

In late April 2000, Kommersant Vlast newspaper political department head Veronika Kutsyllo came into the possession of a document later called "Version Number Six." The source for this was never identified, but nobody ever challenged its authenticity as one of the new ruling administration's "political documents."



Sergei Porter / Vedomosti

## **Mikhail Lesin**

Served as chairman of the board of Gazprom-Media until January 2015

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Mikhail Lesin was one of the key figures in Russia's media policy in the mid-1990s. A civil engineer by training, Lesin began his career producing comedy programs featuring student performances. He was the co-founder of Video International, Russia's first advertising company. Together with fellow co-founder Yury Zapol, Lesin played a key role in forming the Russian

advertising market. This laid the groundwork for his extensive media contacts and influence, especially in television and radio.

Seeing a use for his connections and abilities, the Kremlin appointed Lesin head of the Office of Public Affairs for the administration, where he served in 1996-97. He provided information support during former President Boris Yeltsin's successful election bid and the difficult subsequent period of his heart surgery and recovery.

After briefly heading the All-Russia State Television and Radio Broadcasting Company, Lesin became the Communications and Press Minister in 1999. During his five years in that post, he earned the nickname "Minister of Sorrow" (sorrow, or "pechal" in Russian, sounds like press, or "pechat") in part because of his role in establishing control over the NTV media holding owned by Vladimir Gusinsky.

Mikhail Lesin "withdrew into the shadows" after 2004, serving as an adviser to the Russian president and becoming one of the most influential people in the media market. Largely due to his advice, the National Media Group holding held by the Putin's friends, the Kovalchuk brothers, was purchased. Lesin arranged the appointments of many of the current directors of state-controlled media.

Lesin was dismissed from his post in the fall of 2009 with the scandalously worded verdict of "systematic disciplinary violations and failure to comply with the rules of civil service and the ethical behavior of civil servants." The industry interpreted his "fall" as a victory for then-President Dmitry Medvedev's inner circle as it sought to establish its own relations with media heads.

Alexei Gromov was responsible for Lesin's return to Russia's top echelons of media power in 2013 as the new head of Gazprom-Media. Gromov, who at that time was locked in a heated confrontation with Vyacheslav Volodin, needed a strong, competent and cynical "market player" such as Mikhail Lesin was then and still remains. Lesin managed to again reshape the Russian advertising market and to re-establish Gromov's influence at RIA Novosti after the dismissal of Svetlana Mirnyuk.

Mikhail Lesin was repeatedly implicated in various scandalous moves to consolidate Russian media that are fully or partially controlled by the state. Also, in 2014 U.S. Senator Roger Wicker called for an investigation into possible money laundering in connection with several multimillion-dollar homes that Lesin purchased in Beverly Hills, California.

"Version Number Six" suggested that Putin's future administration would have to make a division between "open" and "secret" policy.

In particular, the policy paper openly calls for the presidential administration to act as a "two-faced Janus." The anonymous authors directly state that, on the one hand, leaders should outwardly adhere to a strictly liberal, law-abiding and constitutional approach, but that, on the other hand, their policy should also contain a "secret component" that, by remaining secret, could and should be used as needed in order to consolidate and retain power.

Among the "secret" tasks that the document lists is the need to establish control over the media and journalists. For example, as part of the presidential administration's policy on political management, it recommends that the authorities:

- Influence the activity of media at the federal, regional and local levels through the collection and use of specific information on the commercial and political activity of each media, its personnel and management, sources of financing, its financial, economic, material and technical resources.

- Influence the work of journalists at the federal, regional and local levels through the collection and use of specific information concerning the commercial and political activity of professional journalists, their sources of financing, their places of employment (at which media outlet they work) ... financial and personal partnerships, etc.

The two mechanisms the paper recommends for working with the media are even bolder.

According to the authors, the first mechanism involves monitoring, collecting and processing the information obtained and then "throwing it back" into society, now cast in "the proper light."

The second proposed mechanism involves "taking control of various media by using specific information gathered for that purpose, including information of a compromising nature. Also, by driving opposition media and media sympathetic to the opposition into financial crisis by revoking their licenses and certifications and by creating conditions under which the activities of each individual opposition media outlet become either controlled or impossible to continue."

Only a few months later and as a result of the legal crackdown, the presidential administration took control over NTV and other Media-Most assets, pushed Boris Berezovsky out of ORT and gradually moved closer to fully implementing the system described by the anonymous authors of "Version Number Six."

## **Terrorism, Extremism and Voluntary Castration**

A second wave of terrorism struck Russia in 2002-04 when Chechen militants, hard hit by Russian military and police operations in that republic, took a page from the al-Qaida playbook by shifting part of its war to target civilians in enemy cities.

The tragic terrorist seizures of the Dubrovka Theater in Moscow in 2002 and the school



in Beslan in 2004 led to the placement of another foundation stone in the new censorship — the idea that information organizations would voluntarily practice self-restraint and even self-censorship.

A new "player" appeared on the scene during the Dubrovka Theater siege. Social networks and blogs provided eyewitness accounts and commentary in addition to traditional media reports.

The main such resource was social networking service Live Journal, where several accounts functioned together as a sort of news agency, collecting and distributing as much information as possible — though often of inferior quality, accuracy and relevance.

The Dubrovka terrorists made direct use of the media as a way to communicate their demands, ideas and threats as live television cameras surrounded the site of the tragedy. This was similar to the way Basayev had taken a busload of journalists hostage in Budyonnovsk. However, it is one thing to carry out an attack in a remote town with bad roads and limited communications, and quite another to do it in the center of Moscow.

It was impossible to bar journalists from capturing the most important footage — but that does not mean the Kremlin did not want to do so.

It was at this point that the presidential administration took another step toward creating its new censorship, clearly installing individuals loyal to Alexei Gromov in key positions in all of the major media — VGTRK, Channel One, NTV and various news agencies.

Sergei Goryachev, who began his career with the Main Administration for Safeguarding State Secrets in the Press, acted as the symbolic chief of news broadcasting for Channel One in 2000–04. His successor in that duty, if not in job description, was Andrei Pisarev, who served as both deputy director of social and political programs for the channel and as head of the political department for the Central Executive Committee of United Russia, the ruling party then led by Putin.

Oleg Dobrodeyev was given responsibility for keeping VGTRK within the "power vertical." He not only attended briefings with Gromov, but also met directly with Putin.

The only thing lacking in this new system was one element found in the "old" system — ideology.

Putin's first presidential term was decidedly non-ideological and purely pragmatic. Now in hindsight, that was clearly no accident.

Although Putin's think tank at that time, the Center for Strategic Research, led then by German Gref, had formulated long-term plans for reforming Russia, those plans were not based on any ideology. They were a classic example of "institutional economics" that sought to create standard and universal conditions for growth and development.

The purpose of the country's existence, an ideological description of the future and other elements necessary to a genuine strategic plan were either lacking or, after 2000, assigned to Vladislav Surkov for development.

Surkov launched an ambitious ideological search, and in addition to his wealth of ideas, countless hordes of "political consultants" and "political centers" serving the Kremlin made their contribution as well.

While Alexei Gromov and Mikhail Lesin were charged with controlling and managing the media, Vladislav Surkov and his associates from numerous "political centers" were tasked with creating a second important component of the system: an "alternate reality" in which the authorities could fully immerse the country.

## **The Last Traces of Freedom**

The system for controlling the media stabilized by 2005 and has continued almost unchanged until the present. At the same time, it has undergone an inevitable evolution: Having taken firm hold on control over the media, the authorities ventured even further and began manipulating the structure of the public discourse.

Having achieved certain results in managing the public agenda, along with the desired shift in public opinion that resulted, the Kremlin decided to expand its zone of influence beyond traditional media into "new media" — from the broadcasting sector into interactive media, and from manipulating the domestic agenda into influencing the international agenda.

The "new system" is based on new principles. As the Soviet past recedes, today's leaders have stripped the Leninist and Stalinist propaganda of its ideology and improved it with techniques that produce even better results.

Of course, many similarities between the Soviet and the new Russian system remain, but in the absence of the Communist Party and the many privileges and "persuasions" it could employ, the ruling authorities must now rely on other sticks and carrots such as property, money — primarily budgetary funds — job postings, government "plants" to control operations and so on.

The authorities are forced to operate in a situation in which, at least on paper, censorship is forbidden.



Maxim Stulov / Vedomosti

## **Vladislav Surkov**

Currently serves as presidential aide responsible for relations with Abkhazia and South Ossetia

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Surkov began his career as a public relations specialist with the Menatep bank, which was created by Mikhail Khodorkovsky. Over the past 20 years, Surkov has held almost every post in the hierarchy of the Putin administration.

Surkov did his most significant work in developing the "new censorship" when he served as deputy head of the presidential administration from 1999 to 2008.

He played a leading role in shaping domestic policy and the structure of the Russian political system while also continually experimenting with social initiatives and movements that would provide support for the ruling regime — organizations such as Walking Together, Nashi and the Young Guard of United Russia.

It is Surkov who probably created the concept of "sovereign democracy," used to describe how Russia's democracy differs from democracy in the West and how the West should not intervene in Russia's domestic affairs. The concept served as the political underpinning of Vladimir Putin's first two terms as president. It was apparently during the process of formulating that concept that he also created his "theories of how the world works" that state-controlled media have since imposed on the Russian people with the illusory and fanciful agenda that dominates today's media

environment.

The new "system" is primarily designed to make the media effective in publicly presenting the agenda — whether real or imagined — which, in turn, helps the president govern the country.

Over time, everything that does not help achieve this goal is considered an "obstacle" or "inimical" to the plan.

The task of the new censorship is to produce an agenda for the public discourse that the greater part of society will support, regardless of what it thought yesterday about those ideas or of how it feels now about more personally pressing issues concerning the local situation, jobs and social conditions.

### **Yellow Telephone and Other Links in the Infernal Chain**

When Vladimir Putin was triumphantly elected to a second term in 2004, the basic features of the new system were already in place: The state held organizational control over the three major television broadcasters — Channel One, VGTRK and NTV — and could use various mechanisms to, if not dictate, then at least "adjust" the news agenda.

The situation with print media was problematic: Many publications retained a high degree of editorial sovereignty, sympathized with the opposition and sought to provide objective coverage of events within Russia.

Following 2005, the system for managing the media succeeded primarily in producing a stable image of Putin and his messages. Television channels and other media controlled by the state gave a "green light" to Vladislav Surkov and his active efforts to "consolidate" various groups such as Nashi, Young Guards and others around President Putin and United Russia. However, at that time at least, those media viewed their support as a form of "payment" in return for the right to continue operations.

Meanwhile, preparations for the second phase of the new censorship began during this period of 2005–08.

In 2004 Mikhail Lesin left his post as Communications and Press Minister to become an adviser to President Putin and, after forming a close alliance with Alexei Gromov, began working on a system for creating and controlling the public agenda.

Svetlana Mirnyuk, who served as chief editor of the RIA Novosti state-owned news agency from 2003 to 2013, explained how that new format worked and how the authorities "tightened the screws" during her final years at that post. In her opinion, officials had no need to systematically intimidate editors, much less the media owners.

Relations between the authorities and media changed gradually, step by step, in roundabout ways and, most frequently, in connection with specific individuals.

According to Mirnyuk, beginning in the early 2000s the authorities divided the media

into three categories. (Gromov and Lesin began the task, and later they were joined by first Surkov, and then his replacement: Vyacheslav Volodin.) The three categories are:

- "Outsiders," or those with views alien to the official line. These include Vedomosti newspaper, Forbes magazine, Novaya Gazeta newspaper, the Lenta.ru website (until March 2014) and several others such as Dozhd television. As with Western media, the authorities either have strictly business relations with them or no relationship at all. They cannot be bought, sold or manipulated.
- "Our guys." These are primarily state media. Since the mid-2000s, this group included the Komsomolskaya Pravda newspaper, and the group of publications and media owned by Aram Gabrelyanov — Zhizn, Lifenews.ru and Izvestia. According to Mironyuk, this category primarily includes editors with whom Alexei Gromov has long had good personal relations, and with whom he can strike "deals" for informational barter: The Kremlin organizes exclusive interviews for the publications but expects certain "services" in return.
- "In-betweeners." These are either semi-outsiders or semi-locals with whom the authorities can sometimes strike deals, but not always. Radio station Ekho Moskvyy and news agency Interfax are the most notable examples.

Of course, one important tool for manipulating the public agenda is the "media hotline" that the authorities created in the mid-2000s. This is a system of direct communication between Kremlin "handlers" and chief editors at state-controlled media. Later, special yellow telephones were installed on the desks of their news editors that linked them directly to the Kremlin.

Alexander Orlov, who served as deputy editor-in-chief of the Rossia-24 television channel from 2008 to 2012 explained that VGTRK Deputy Chairman Dmitry Mednikov and Rossia-24 chief editor Yevgeny Bekasov frequently take calls on their yellow phones — not so much to receive their latest orders as to consult with Kremlin staff on how best to present this or that news story.

For example, Orlov recalls that during the economic crisis of 2008, the caller on the yellow phone prohibited VGTRK channels from using the word "crisis" in their broadcasts, even while simultaneously requiring that they report on the crisis.

## **Restricting the Agenda**

The existence of the new censorship has been an open secret for the last five years already.

Although Dmitry Medvedev acted as president from 2008 to 2012, Alexei Gromov remained in charge of state-controlled media exactly as before.

The economic crisis of 2008–2010 dealt a major blow to Russia media.

Although a media market ostensibly continued to exist, government subsidies — especially in the form of contracts for "information services" — became increasingly important for any firm's continued existence. Originally used by governors as a way to control the local media, the practice gradually spread to the capital.

Of course, the main innovation of the new censorship in recent years is the unofficial but complete ban on state-controlled media from formulating their own news agenda.

State-controlled television and radio news stations are now highly dependent on their "yellow phones" and federal funding. And newspapers were compelled to follow the agenda presented on television. Otherwise, they would find themselves at odds not only with Kremlin handlers, but also with their audiences, who get most of their news from television.

Information agencies were an exception, enjoying some — and, at times, complete — freedom in setting their own news agendas, even during the mass protests from winter 2011 to spring 2012.

However, the restructuring of RIA Novosti in 2013–14 put an end to that relative freedom.

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*The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.*

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